

ROUND 3 UPDATE:

IM John Watson has provided this in-depth look at the battle between Firouzja and Nakamura from Saturday's third round.

NIMZO-INDIAN DEFENSE (E36)

GM Alireza Firouzja (2793)

GM Hikaru Nakamura (2760)

FIDE Candidates Tournament (3.4), 06.19.2022

Annotations by IM John Watson

This game can be looked at in two halves: a highly theoretical opening, for which I've tried to indicate an outline of the key lines, and then a fascinating ending, which easily could have gone either way and will repay close study.

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nc3 Bb4 4. Qc2 0-0 5. a3 Bxc3+ 6. Qxc3 d5

Hikaru has been playing this way for some years now. It's a fascinating line and on the plus side, he's extremely comfortable with the typical themes and play.

On the downside, however, it makes him arguably easier to prepare for than players with a broader repertoire. In this game, Firouzja comes to the board armed with a surprise.

7. Bg5

7. Nf3 dxc4 8. Qxc4 b6 9. Bg5 is another main line that Nakamura has faced, e.g., 9. ... Ba6 10. Qa4 h6 11. Bh4 Qe7 12. Rcl c5 13. dxc5 Rc8!? 14. c6 b5 15. Qa5 (Indjic – Nakamura, Titled Tuesday 2022) and now 15. ... Rxc6! was a strong move, based upon 16. Rxc6? Nxc6 17. Qxa6? Qc5! and White's king is too exposed.

7. ... dxc4 8. Qxc4 b6 9. Rd1 Ba6 10. Qa4 h6

This has replaced 10. ... Qd7 as the main line.

11. Bh4 Qe7

11. ... Qd7 12. Qc2 Qc6 13. Qxc6 Nxc6 14. Bxf6 gxf6 15. Nf3 Rfd8 16. e3 has been played in a number of games, including one with Le Quang Liem as White facing Hikaru, which went 16. ... Bb7 17. Bd3 Ne7 18. Ke2 c5!? (18. ... Bxf3+ 19. Kxf3 c5 20. dxc5 bxc5) 19. dxc5 bxc5±, with an eventual draw in Le – Nakamura, chess24.com 2021.

12. Nf3 Rd8



13. Qc2

Unusual, with White's next move in mind.

a) Nakamura had previously faced an idea similar to the game's: 13. e4!? Bxf1 14. Rxf1 g5 15. Nxc5 hxc5 16. Bxc5, a bold sacrifice that requires precise defense:



POSITION AFTER 16. Bxc5

16. ... e5 17. Rd3 (17. f4 exd4 18. e5 Nbd7 19. Qxd4 Qe6 20. Rf3 Nf8) 17. ... Rxd4 (17. ... exd4! 18. Rg3 Qxe4+ 19. Kd2 Nh5 20. Bxd8+ Nxc3 21. hxc3 Nc6 22. Re1 Qxc2 23. Re8+ Kg7 24. Qb5 Rxd8 25. Qg5+ Kh7 26. Qh5+ Kg7 27. Qg5+=) 18. Bxf6 Rxa4 19. Bxe7 Rxe4+ 20. Kd2 Nc6 21. Bf6±, although Black managed to draw in Le – Nakamura, Saint Louis 2021.

b) Hikaru had also played against the relatively harmless 13. e3 a few times, for example, 13. ... Bxf1 14. Rxf1 c5 15. dxc5 Rxd1+ 16. Qxd1 (16. Kxd1 g5 17. Bg3 Qxc5 18. Kd2 Nbd7 19. Rcl was drawn in Carlsen – Nakamura, chess24.com 2021) 16. ... g5 17. Bg3 Qxc5 18. Qd8+ Kg7 19. Be5 Qc1+ 20. Ke2 Qc4+ 21. Ke1 Qc1+ 22. Ke2 and a draw was agreed in Mamedyarov – Nakamura, Stavanger 2018.

c) Mamedyarov also tried 13. g4!? against Hikaru, which opens some attacking lines but is also a bit slow in terms of development: 13. ... Bb7 14. Bg2 Nbd7 15. Rg1 c5 (15. ... g5 16. Bg3 c5 is a safe option) 16. g5 hxc5 17. Nxc5 Bxc2 18. Rxc2 Nf8!? (18. ... Ne8=) 19. Ne4 Ng6 20. Bg5 Qb7! 21. Bxf6 Qxe4 22. f3 Qf4 23. Bxd8 Rxd8 with full compensation for the exchange (Mamedyarov – Nakamura, Saint Louis 2021.)

13. ... c5 14. e4

14. Bxf6 Qxf6 15. dxc5?! Rxd1+ 16. Kxd1 exposes White's king for a mere pawn: 16. ... Nd7 (or 16. ... Bb7) 17. e3 (17. c6 Rc8 18. e3 Bb7! 19. Bb5 Nb8 20. Nd4 Qe5 21. Kd2 Nxc6 22. Nxc6 Bxc6 23. Bxc6 Qd6+ 24. Ke2 Rxc6 25. Qe4) 17. ... Bxf1 (17. ... Bb7) 18. Rxf1 Nxc5 19. Ke2 Rd8 20. Rd1 was a draw in Seresin – Schitco, Karlsruhe 2019.

14. ... Bxf1 15. Rxf1 g5 16. Nxc5!

The point. 16. Bg3? Nc6! 17. dxc5 Rxd1+ (17. ... bxc5) 18. Kxd1 Rd8+ 19. Kc1 was about equal in Bach – Johnson, Chess.com 2022.

16. ... hxc5 17. Bxc5



White threatens e4-e5, but also Rd3-g3.

17. ... Nc6

A complex solution that Hikaru played rather quickly.

Apparently 17. ... cxd4 is also playable: 18. e5 (18. f4 Nbd7 19. e5 Qc5 transposes) 18. ... Nbd7 19. f4 (19. exf6 Qc5! 20. Qxc5 bxc5=) 19. ... Qc5=. Then White might risk something like 20. Qe2!? (20. Qxc5 bxc5 21. exf6=) 20. ... Nd5 21. Rf3 Rdc8 22. Rg3 Kf8 23. f5!?, although the engines aren't too impressed.

After 17. ... e5 18. d5! intends Rd3-g3 (or f3). This may be defensible for Black, but he'd much rather clarify the position.

18. Qc1!

Played quickly, and obviously part of Alireza's preparation.

18. e5 is the obvious alternative, when one forcing line goes 18. ... Nxd4 19. Qb1 Qb7 20. Bxf6 Qxc2 21. Kd2!! Qf3 (21. ... Nf3+ 22. Kc1 Rxd1+ 23. Rxd1 Nd4 24. Qd3 Qxf2 25. Qg3+ Qxc3 26. hxc3 Kh7=) 22. Rg1+ Kf8 23. Qh7 Qe2+ 24. Kc3 (24. Kc1 Nb3+ 25. Kb1 Rxd1+ -) 24. ... Qf3+ 25. Kd2 (25. Rd3 Ne2+) 25. ... Qe2+ 26. Kc3 Qf3+=.

18. ... Rxd4

18. ... e5!? may be playable, but I wouldn't want to face a prepared line after 19. d5 Nd4 20. Rd3. (Note 20. Bh4? Rd6 21. Rd3 fails to 21. ... Qd7!) Objectively, 20. ... Qd6 21. Rh3 Nxe4 22. Bxd8 Rxd8 23. f3 Qxd5! 24. fxe4 Qxe4+ 25. Kf2 Qf5+= holds, but that's hard to be sure of in an over-the-board melee.

19. Rxd4 Nxd4 20. Qf4



Hikaru was up to an hour and a half of elapsed time here, while Firouzja had used eight minutes!

20. ... Nc2+

20. ... Qd7 has a similar idea but is even more forcing after 21. Bxf6 Nc2+ 22. Ke2 Qb5+ 23. Kd2 Qxf1 24. Qg5+ (24. Qh6?? Qxf2+ 25. Kc1 Qe3+-) 24. ... Kf8 25. Qg7+ Ke8 26. Qg8+ Kd7 27. Qxf7+ Kc6 28. Qxe6+ Kb5 29. Kxc2 Rf8=, when White may as well take the perpetual beginning with 30. Qd7+ Ka6 31. Qa4+.

21. Kd1 Qd7+ 22. Kxc2

If 22. Kc1 Nd4 23. Qxf6 Qb5!+.

22. ... Qa4+ 23. Kb1

23. b3 Qxe4+ 24. Qxe4 Nxe4 25. Bf4 Nf6 is roughly equivalent.

23. ... Qxe4+ 24. Qxe4 Nxe4 25. Bf4 Nf6 26. h4

Still the top engine move. Soon after this Alireza began to think at length, using up considerable time trying to create some chances in the ending. This almost paid off, as we shall see.

26. ... Nd5 27. Bd2 f5 28. g3 Kf7 29. f3

With the idea g3-g4.

29. ... Rh8 30. Bg5

(see diagram top of next column)

30. ... c4!?



A very logical attempt at counterplay, but probably 30. ... e5! was simpler, since White can't successfully advance on the kingside, e.g., 31. g4 is met by 31. ... f4! and ... Nd5-e3.

31. g4 b5 32. Rd1 fxe4 33. fxe4 a5?!

33. ... Rg8! ties White to defense of the g-pawn: 34. Rf1+ Ke8= 35. Rg1 Kf7 36. Bd2 e5 37. Rf1+ Ke6.

34. h5

34. Rf1+ Kg7 35. h5 b4! helps to simplify on the queenside.

34. ... Rg8

Perhaps 34. ... b4!.

35. Rf1+ Ke8?!

A tough decision. It seems that the better move was 35. ... Kg7, but 36. Bd2 b4 37. g5 still requires care. The clock was becoming a factor.

36. h6 Rf8



37. Rxf8+!?

Very hard to resist, since it comes so close to winning outright, but the engines prefer keeping the rooks on:

a) 37. Rc1 Kf7 38. Bd2 (38. a4!? Kg6! 39. Bd2 bxa4 40. Rxc4 Rf1+ 41. Bc1 Rg1 42. g5 Nb4!), which forces Black to defend more in all sectors, for example, 38. ... Kg6! (38. ... a4?? 39. Rf1+ Ke8 40. Rxf8+ Kxf8 41. g5 Kf7 42. h7 Kg7 43. g6 e5 44. Bc3! Nxc3+ 45. bxc3

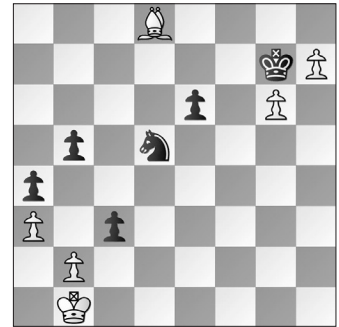
Kh8 46. Kc2 Kg7 47. Kd2 and White walks to e4 and wins.) 39. Re1 (39. g5 e5 40. a4 c3 41. bxc3 bxa4 42. Rh1 Rf7 43. Rh4 Nf4 44. c4 Rh7 45. c5 Kxg5 and Black can hold) 39. ... Re8 40. Re5 Kh7 41. g5 b4 42. Kc2 Kg6 43. a4 Kf7 44. b3 Rc8.

(b) 37. Rh1!? is also interesting. Black barely escapes in the following line, but there may be better tries for White: 37. ... Rg8 38. a4 bxa4 39. Bd2 Kf7 40. Ka2 e5 41. Ka3 Nf4 42. Bc3 Nd3 43. Kxa4 Kg6 44. g5 Ra8 45. Kb5 Rc8 46. Kxa5 Kxg5 47. h7 Rh8 48. Kb5 Kg6 49. Kxc4 Nxb2+ 50. Bxb2 Rxh7.

37. ... Kxf8 38. Bd8 a4 39. g5 Kf7 40. h7 Kg7 41. g6

Now the threat is ... Ba5-c3+ and wins, but Black has just enough time for...

41. ... c3!



42. bxc3

After 42. Bg5 cxb2 43. Kxb2 e5 it turns out that White has no way in. If he brings the bishop away from f6, ...Nd5-f4 draws, and if the king drifts too far towards the kingside, ...b5-b4 creates another passed pawn.

42. ... Nxc3+ 43. Kc2 Nd5 44. Bg5

Threatening Bc1-b2, but there's not enough time:

44. ... e5 45. Kd2

It's equal after 45. Bc1 Nf4 (or 45. ... Ne7 46. Bh6+ Kh8 47. Bd2 Nxg6) 46. Bb2 Nxg6.

45. ... Kh8 46. Ke1 b4! 47. axb4

Or 47. Kd1 b3.

47. ... a3 48. Bc1 Nxb4 49. Kd2 Nd5 50.

Bxa3 Nf4 51. Bb2 Nxg6 52. Bxe5+ Nxe5

53. Kc3 Kxh7, draw.

Talk about a close call! I'm sure that there is more to this ending than I've analyzed here, and I don't know the objective truth about it, but you can have fun trying to find a way for White to improve.